

The Pre-Raphaelites

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This biennium has brought interdisciplinary readings inspired by feminist art history, articles on the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, several articles and two books devoted to the work of William Morris, and new tributary streams to the growing river of feminist criticism of Christina Rossetti's work. Critics continue to be drawn to Pre-Raphaelite literary texts by their highly allegorical language and gendered representations of attachment and sexuality, and in the case of Morris, by the intricate interrelations between the literary, artistic, and ideological aspects of his complex lifework.

Two of the articles on Christina Rossetti's poetry attempt to rescue interpretations of her work from familiar stereotypes of romanticism and women's art. In "Fair Margaret of 'Maiden-Song': Rossetti's Response to the Romantic Nightingale" (VN 80 [1991]: 8-13), Diane D'Amico comments on Rossetti's Christian adaptations of male romantic stereotypes in "Maiden-Song," a poem in which Margaret, the third, most domestic, and self-effacing of three sisters manages to attract the love of a king, presumably an emblem of Christ the King of Heaven. D'Amico examines Rossetti's responses to Romantic traditions, and reconsiders the special problems Rossetti and women poets faced as they attempted to appropriate this tradition.

In "The Indian Mutiny and Christina Rossetti's First Appearance in *Once a Week*" (JPRS, n.s. 1, no. 1 [Spring 1992]: 16-19), Jan Marsh discusses an early 1859 version of Rossetti's poem about the Indian Mutiny. Rossetti was apparently prompted to write this homage to "family values" by a *London Illustrated News* report of an alleged incident (later shown to be apocryphal) in which a British captain shot first his wife and then himself, as a besieging Indian army advanced. Marsh's forthcoming biography of Christina Rossetti will include much new information about the poet's literary associations and the negotiations she had to undertake to publish her work.

Two 1991 articles reexamined once again the potential feminist implications of *Goblin Market*. In "The Potential of Sisterhood: Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*" (VP 29 [1991]: 63-78), Janet Galligani Casey argues that feminist readings have failed to consider the possibility that the poem's allegories may apply as well to men as women, and reexamines the poem's views of female moral power in the context of Victorian speculations about the "femi-

nine" nature of divinity and establishment of religious "sisterhoods." Casey advocates that women and men alike "openly embrace both the 'stronger' and the 'weaker' sides of life in the knowledge that both aspects are necessary for completeness," but her own historically informed discussions of Victorian "sisterhood," and Laura's words in Rossetti's concluding stanza ("There is no friend like a sister"), may qualify the gender-neutrality she finds central to Rossetti's work.

A different reading of *Goblin Market* appears in "Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'" (*ELH* 58 [1991]: 903-933), in which Elizabeth Helsinger interprets in several contexts the poem's portrayal of women's uneasy position in the Victorian marketplace. Helsinger first reviews capitalist and Marxist beliefs about the relation between women and consumption, and argues that the poem examines "the domestic desires of women . . . as dramas of competitive buying and selling in which women are always at risk as objects to be purchased, yet also implicated as agents of consumption." More particularly, she interprets the poem as "a fantasy of consumer power, where the empowered consumer is a woman," in sharp contrast with Rossetti's concrete experiences with the realities of Victorian publishing.

Helsinger also points out that Rossetti wrote *Goblin Market* in opposition to the attitudes about seduction embodied in Dante's poem "Jenny" and in several Victorian idylls and ballads, and remarks that the poem underscores concerns about the fate of female love and beauty that appear in Rossetti's other poems about sisterhood. All of this is essentially accurate, in my view, as is Helsinger's observation that there may have been something illusory about the poem's interpretation of redemptive sisterly domesticity as an escape from the repressive economic/sexual/moral/literary marketplace. In her final sentence, Helsinger concludes that we "also remain invested in the political economies of production and exchange that make utopian desire both necessary—and utopian."

Authors of recent articles on Dante Rossetti have tended to focus on complicated filiations with Romantic predecessors and Modernist successors. Ernest Fontana's "Rossetti's 'On the Field of Waterloo': An Intertextual Reading" (*VP* 30 [1992]: 179-182) contrasts the reactions to the battlefield in an early Rossetti sonnet with Wordsworth's earnestly empathic response in "Memorials of A Tour on the Continent 1820." Wordsworth struggled to understand the "vast hoards of hidden carnage near / And horror breathing from the silent ground"; Rossetti laconically observed that the slaughter added little to the ancient

earth, where "there is no single spot / But hath among its dust the dust of man."

In "Rossetti and 'The Rose': Yeats's Borrowings from 'Soul's Beauty'" (*ELN* 28 [March 1991]: 47-57), Glenn Everett assimilates Yeats's use of the rose symbol to allegorical associations found in two of Rossetti's *House of Life* sonnets, "Body's Beauty" and "Soul's Beauty," but finds Yeats's use of similar images "not a simple continuation of a tradition but a transmutation of those materials into a new and fundamentally original work of art." In my view, critics might well undertake more extensive studies of the interrelations between Rossetti's *House of Life* and Yeats's poems on love and sexuality, especially Yeats's intense, sometimes troubled meditations on sex and female beauty, often spoken in a woman's voice.

In "From Allegory to Indeterminacy: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Positive Agnosticism" (*DR* 70, nos. 1 and 2 [1991]: 70-106; 146-168), D.M.R. Bentley interprets Rossetti's evolution from allegorical realism to aesthetic symbolism as a development toward "positive agnosticism," which Bentley construes as a disposition to persist in an uncertain search for something meaningful and numinous in human existence. An expression of this spiritual attitude can be found, for example, in the concluding lines of "The One Hope," the final sonnet in *The House of Life*, where the sound of the beloved's name (not her presence or any other mental state) somehow evokes such a supernatural presence.

A quiet trumpet blast reverberates round the walls of Pre-Raphaelite criticism in Lynne Pearce, *Woman, Image, Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature* (1991). Pearce writes clear, committed prose, in service to a goal which has preoccupied many contemporary women scholars of the nineteenth century: to find ways for feminists to read/view largely misogynistic literature/art, without being alienated, excluded, or coopted. Pearce reexamines Pre-Raphaelite representations of women under categories such as "The Virgin," "Beatrice," "Mariana," "Guenevere," and "Venus," and concludes in some cases that feminist readers should simply abandon the search for common ground with the texts and works of art under discussion.

Pearce also makes free use of poems and paintings on similar topics as instruments of mutual interpretation. Such methods can efface real distinctions, but they also widen the effective range of material for the topics she treats. In discussing D. G. Rossetti, for example—one of her chief villains—she interprets Rossetti's "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin" in the context of "Ave," the poem he appended to the

frame, and she also considers "Beata Beatrix" against the background of the description of Beatrice in "Dante at Verona." Pearce's reasons for finding one painting or text repellent and another inviting are ingenious and sometimes unanticipated, and she sets forth her terms clearly for the reader's endorsement or disapproval. Her book persuasively extends the long tradition of interdisciplinary readings of Pre-Raphaelite literature and art, and offers cogent feminist discussions of gender, heterosexuality, and male representations of female subjects.

Significant work appeared in 1991-92 devoted to three major topics that are central to Morris' lifework: his efforts as a social reformer and decorative artist; his literary representations of gender in the prose romances and elsewhere; and the ideological implications of the language and structure of his literary works.

Charles Harvey and Jon Press, *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain* (1991), is one of the most important supplements to Morris' biography since E. P. Thompson's 1977 revision of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. Harvey and Press provide a thorough economic history of each aspect of Morris' life and business dealings against the background context of Victorian economic practices, and reassess Morris' social and financial goals at each stage of his life. The result blends obvious sympathy for their subject's radical social ideals with insightful pragmatism in assessment of his motives and options.

The authors begin, appropriately enough, with an account of William Morris Senior's financial dealings—his speculations as a discount "bill-broker," his opulent lifestyle, and his heavy mining investments, among them the purchase of a quarter-interest in the Devonshire Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company. When he died suddenly at age fifty, in 1847, the company for which he had worked went bankrupt, but his family retained a substantial fortune of £60,000, including mining stocks which they partially liquidated and reinvested in subsequent years.

The book also traces, of course, Morris' own activities as the principal partner of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., and examines carefully the cost of each of the Firm's activities, the contributions of each partner to the Firm's income, the fluctuations in the demand for its products, and the particular aspects of Morris designs that apparently rendered them attractive to Victorian purchasers. Especially interesting are the book's detailed accounts of the extensive research that made possible the degree of perfection Morris sought; the rise and fall in the popularity of the Firm's stained glass (both secular and

religious); the stages of the Firm's expansion of its line of products; the economic and legal issues that attended its reorganization as Morris and Company; the enormous significance of the establishment of the specialized works at Merton Abbey; and the concrete calculations that permitted Morris to undertake his enormous financial commitment to the Socialist League.

Harvey and Press also provide an extensive palette of data for charts and lists of the different buildings and tasks performed at the Merton Abbey Works, and illuminate the economic issues behind many particular decisions. They document, for example, the fluctuations in the incomes of Morris' co-workers as well, among them Edward Burne-Jones, and set forth clearly the reasons behind the company's slow decline after Morris' death.

In my view, all this simply underscores how amazingly productive and resilient Morris was, even in periods when (crushing) expenses greatly exceeded his (large) income. How many people have ever broken new paths in design, and written thousands of lines of excellent narrative poetry, at the same time they shouldered enormous economic burdens they knew might well have led at any time to sudden collapse? In this oblique sense, perhaps, Morris led a life almost as dramatic as did his poetic heroes Ogier, Jason, and Bellerophon. Harvey and Press's book provides in any case a valuable study of a truly exceptional "individual solution," a uniquely committed and multiply accomplished public, private, and literary life.

Several articles that appeared during 1991 and 1992 were devoted to aspects of Morris' decorative artwork and social ideals. Among these are Vincent Geoghegan's "A Golden Age: From the Reign of Kronos to the Realm of Freedom" (*History of Political Thought* 12 [Summer 1991]: 189-208), which reexamines Morris' vision of a socialist future in a historical context of Victorian ideas about "primitivism" and golden ages, and concludes that "Morris and Bax, like a number of other Second International Marxists, were thus able to deploy a form of Golden Age [evocation] in a forward-looking political theory. That they were able to do so speaks against those interpretations which see 'Golden Ages' as belonging exclusively to the politics of nostalgia and reaction."

In "'A Thing to Mind': The Materialist Aesthetic of William Morris" (*HLQ* 55 [1992]: 55-74), Jerome McGann reinterprets Morris' contributions to the art of book design. McGann considers the relation between Morris' text and its physical presentation at several stages of his work, with close attention to the visual nuances of "A Book of Verse" and Morris' page design at the Kelmscott Press, and

examines several ways in which Morris' understanding of typographical layout may have influenced his composition. He also suggests that the design of Kelmscott books may have had an effect on the emergence of twentieth-century visual poetry, and asserts more strongly still, that "to anyone who is more interested in the poetical than the expository functions of texts, Morris' Kelmscott poetry will appear as remarkable in its way as those equally 'unreadable' texts engraved one hundred years before by William Blake."

In "Tensions in Paradise: Anarchism, Civilization, and Pleasure in Morris' *News from Nowhere*" (ESC 17 [1991]: 73-87), Rowland McMaster retraces several parallels between Morris' views and contemporary anarchist ideas, and between Morris' use of the term "civilization" and Edward Carpenter's usage in *Civilization: Its Cause and Cure*. Patrick Parrinder in "News from the Land of No News" (*Foundation* 51 [1991]: 29-37) conjectures that the narrative structure of *News from Nowhere* reflects certain nineteenth-century notions about séances, and bears the message, among others, that "not only do we need the vision of the future, but the future will need us, at least in the form of some representative messenger."

In *History and Community: Essays in Victorian Medievalism* (1992), a volume which I edited, Chris Water's "Marxism, Medievalism, and Popular Culture" provides a succinct summary of opposing nineteenth-century evaluations of England's medieval past. Waters also reexamines Morris' contributions to this tradition, and reevaluates the complex blend of nostalgia and visionary critique that inevitably influenced Marxist interpretations of the European medieval past. (Two other articles from this volume are glossed below.)

Other essays critically evaluate Morris' representations of gender. In "William Morris and the 'Speech Friend': Triangles, Gender, and Romance" (AnSch 7 [1990]: 235-254), Jeffrey L. Spear reanalyzes the painful sexual triangle that developed in Morris' personal life, and argues that an alternate ideal for sexual relationships emerges in his late prose romances. Spear reads *The Well at the World's End*, for example, as an attack on "possessiveness and the treatment of women as property," and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* as a working out of "the dangers of resignation and self-denial." He further suggests that the violent aspects of heroic legends are somewhat mitigated by Morris' "archaic diction and the technical vocabulary of the armorer." Such "linguistic innocence," in Spear's view, helped Morris represent incidents of sexual abuse, for example, without mirroring it. Spear also observes that Morris' carefully crafted style also permitted women characters to express heterosexual desires in a straightforward

way, and gave "men and women the same untainted vocabulary of affection—terms like 'speech-friend' take shapes within the narrative without the cultural baggage carried by the standard terms for love and desire."

My own essay, "Gender and Political Allegory in the Last Romances of William Morris" (*JPRS* n.s. 1, no. 2 [1992]: 12-23), reviews some of the political and sexual-political allegories that can be elicited from Morris' last romances, especially *The Sundering Flood*, and traces a conjectural progression in their representations of gender-division. The female-quest narrative of *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (the next-to-last romance) can be readily interpreted in the light of Morris' cautious sympathy with the attitudes of contemporary socialist feminism, but the plot and central metaphor of *The Sundering Flood* suggests a deep apprehension that men and women may be "sundered" from birth, and that they can be brought together only by the healing of other forms of social alienation, and an end to war. Only a more peaceful social order could then bridge the Sundering Flood, and nourish in men and women the deeply 'feminine' qualities Morris admired in domestic artisanry, especially love of "the earth and . . . all that grows out of it."

During the last two years, several essays and a book have reevaluated some of the ideological implications of Morris' poetic style and use of language. In *Woman, Image, Text*, for example, reviewed above, Lynne Pearce observes with approval that the title figure of "The Defence of Guenevere" is allowed "to expose her oppression." In "The Style of Evasion: William Morris' *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*" (*VP* 29 [1991]: 99-114), Constance W. Hassett reviews some ways in which *The Defence's* unorthodox language, indeterminate meaning, heavily stressed rhythms, portrayal of jarring and abrupt motions, and unexpected endings provide "resistance to conventional assumptions about the autonomy of the individual and the normal behavior of language." Hassett adopts the Kristevan view that unorthodox language implies political opposition, and sees *The Defence of Guenevere* in these terms as "a sustained act of aesthetic non-compliance; its every artistic move is a sign of resistance." Such claims seem to me more or less right, but they should be tempered with an awareness that Morris actually drew on the work of romantic and early Victorian "spasmodic" poets for *The Defence's* abrupt physicality, paradoxical transitions, and ambiguity of interpretation.

In *The Design of 'The Earthly Paradise'* (1991), I try to explore the implications of the poem's striking shifts of tone, and argue that as Morris' style developed, he clarified earlier motifs and strategies for

presenting human identity in time, and that the tales of *The Earthly Paradise's* inner frame evolved from relatively simplistic *exempla* of chastisement and reward to more complex, near-Stoic accounts of self-sufficient altruism and love. I further suggest that the work's intricate contrapuntal part-writing for an echeloned chorus of Wanderers, Elders, auditors, and "singer(s)" developed a redemptive view of history, a view that anticipated the convictions of its author's later socialist writings, and expressed "a collective desire to reach beyond one's time, place, culture, and individual consciousness, and honor marginal forms of empathy that may forever elude our efforts at historical understanding." The result, therefore, was not indeed an escapist work, but "one of the major achievements of Morris' life, the focus of intense literary and emotional concentration for more than a decade, [and] an attempt to find historical meaning in literature of grief, shared memory and renewal."

In "No 'Fourth Wall': The Experience of Drama in William Morris's *Love Is Enough*" (ESC 17 [1991]: 301-317), Karen Herbert assimilates Morris' iterated use of narrative frames in his poetic masque to levels of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. In "Classical Roots of William Morris's Autobiography" (JPRS n.s. 1, no. 2 [1992]: 1-11), Lawrence Wheeler finds evidence in *News from Nowhere* for a different form of *Entfremdung*—alienation from the deconstructed self: "While the basic constituent elements of autobiography in the western tradition are the identification and articulation of meaningful fragments of self, Morris repeatedly identifies self-fragments but frustrates their articulation."

In "Travels Abroad in Iceland and Paris: Morris's Utopian Mapping" (JPRS 1, no. 2 [1992]: 24-29), Karen Herbert argues that Morris' observations in his 1871 and 1873 *Journals* "disclose an underlying dialectic of desire and dread," and suggests that in both these *Journals* and *The Pilgrims of Hope*, his later long poem about the political events of 1871, "the transcription of remembered experience, coloured by present hope for the future, reveals both the glory and the error of past expectations." Pamela Bracken Wiens finds a similar correlation between the rhetoric of Morris' political dialogues and his doctrine of fellowship in "To See Bigly and Kindly: Dialogue and Dialectic in the Political Discourse of William Morris" (JPRS n.s. 1, no. 2 [1992]: 30-36).

In "William Morris' Late Romances: The Struggle Against Closure" (in *History and Community*, cited above), Hartley Spatt argues that Morris' mode of composition of the late romances reflects a recognition of the need to break free of "the tales of old time" and "be-

come the makers of our own tales." As Spatt summarizes this ideal, "the result is not closure, but rather an eternal succession of creative tales and tellings, running parallel to that 'eternal recurrence of lovely changes' which is the created world." In "Alternative Victorian Futures: Historicism, *Past and Present*, and *A Dream of John Ball*" (also in *History and Community*), I contrast the static, controlling narrator in Carlyle's *Past and Present* with the more empathic, conversational narrator in Morris' *A Dream of John Ball*, and argue similarly that *A Dream of John Ball*'s complexly loving interchange with the past "witnesses its narrator's belief in the continuity and coherence of human emotions, and his faith in a bonding of often-unrecognized social and artistic saints, across changes of language, culture, and the collective silence of our individual deaths."

In summary: the tensions between religion and feminine resistance in Christina Rossetti's poetry, the intricacies of William Morris' efforts to support design innovation and the Social Revolution by "catering to the swinish luxuries of the rich," and the complexities of gender, eros, and fellowship in the work of Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, have all continued to inspire eloquent reinterpretations and occasional delight during the last two years.

Swinburne

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In my last review of Swinburne studies, I remarked that Richard Dellamora has placed this field within the larger context of gay studies; in the subsequent two years this seems to have become something of a trend among Swinburneans. The most striking advance in this direction has been made by Thais E. Morgan, through her thoughtful discussion of masculine identity in "Violence, Creativity, and the Feminine: Poetics and Gender Politics in Swinburne and Hopkins" (*Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Antony H. Harrison and Beverly Taylor, pp. 84-107). In a reading which is sure to be controversial, Morgan suggests that "On the Cliffs," along with Hopkins' "The Wreck of the Deutschland," conceals and reveals a homoeroticism which is the real basis of Swinburne's art. I do not agree with Morgan that Sappho is reduced to an "ancillary role"